'Phreaking' Spreading In Britain

LONDON — British Post Office spokesmen call them "phone phreaks" and insist there aren't many of them. But the post office people are reluctant to talk about them or how they work for fear they might multiply.

The "phreaks" are the specialists who wend their way electronically through the world's telephone systems to talk around the world for nothing, or for the price of a local call. In this country, the phone system is run by the post office.

Although not described as "phreaks," several post office employes were fined a total of $4,080 at Bristol the other day for a series of offenses including the use of a special device and secret telephone codes to telephone the United States and West Germany at local call rates.

According to testimony at their trial, the employes illegally tapped a relay box into the Bristol Exchange. They then telephoned abroad by dialing a particular number, waiting and then using a secret code which enabled them to make overseas calls at Bristol rates.

Prosecutor Russell Harris was reticent on the exact procedures used by the employes.

"I do not want to give details," he said.

A seeming counterpart of the Bristol trial is scheduled here when 17 men arrested ty Scotland Yard detectives in London last month are to face charges of "illegal abstraction of electricity involving the telephone system." They apparently were "phreaking."

The detectives seized some equipment when they collared the 17 men in a Hammersmith apartment. But there is no indication what it comprised.

There are some hints, however, that the detectives and post office inspectors on the "phreak" beat had been looking for telephonists using a "blue box" with 13 red buttons. In some electronic fashion, these buttons enable overseas callers to bypass the British and foreign networks' call and charge-monitoring systems.

Defense Attorney Colin Harvey suggested at the Bristol trial that "phreaking" was "widespread over a considerable part of the country and involves others who will not appear in court.

"It permeates the institution and sweeps up as it goes along, until otherwise decent, sensible and hard-working people are involved," he lamented without elaboration.

But a post office spokesman said that "phreaking" was less of a problem in Britain than in the United States on either a population or telephone-population ratio basis.

Most of the "phreaks," the spokesmen said, "are electronic enthusiasts who see the telephone system as a challenge to their technical ingenuity."

He declined to estimate the number of "phreaks" in Britain or explain their procedures, on the grounds such information might tempt others to try to beat the telephone system.

Some Britons possibly with such yearnings were given a helping hand not long ago by an underground group here called "People's Power."

It published and distributed to some Londoners a 14-page booklet, resembling a post office publication for bona fide telephone subscribers, which told them about a device to avoid charges for some calls.

The device consists of a mechanism which reportedly frustrates the charge-metering system on their telephones.

Not all British telephone bilking enthusiasts could use such a device, however, because many of them have no telephones.

Some Britons who have applied for telephone service, including a secretary in the post office which handles their installation, have been waiting as long as a year for their instruments.

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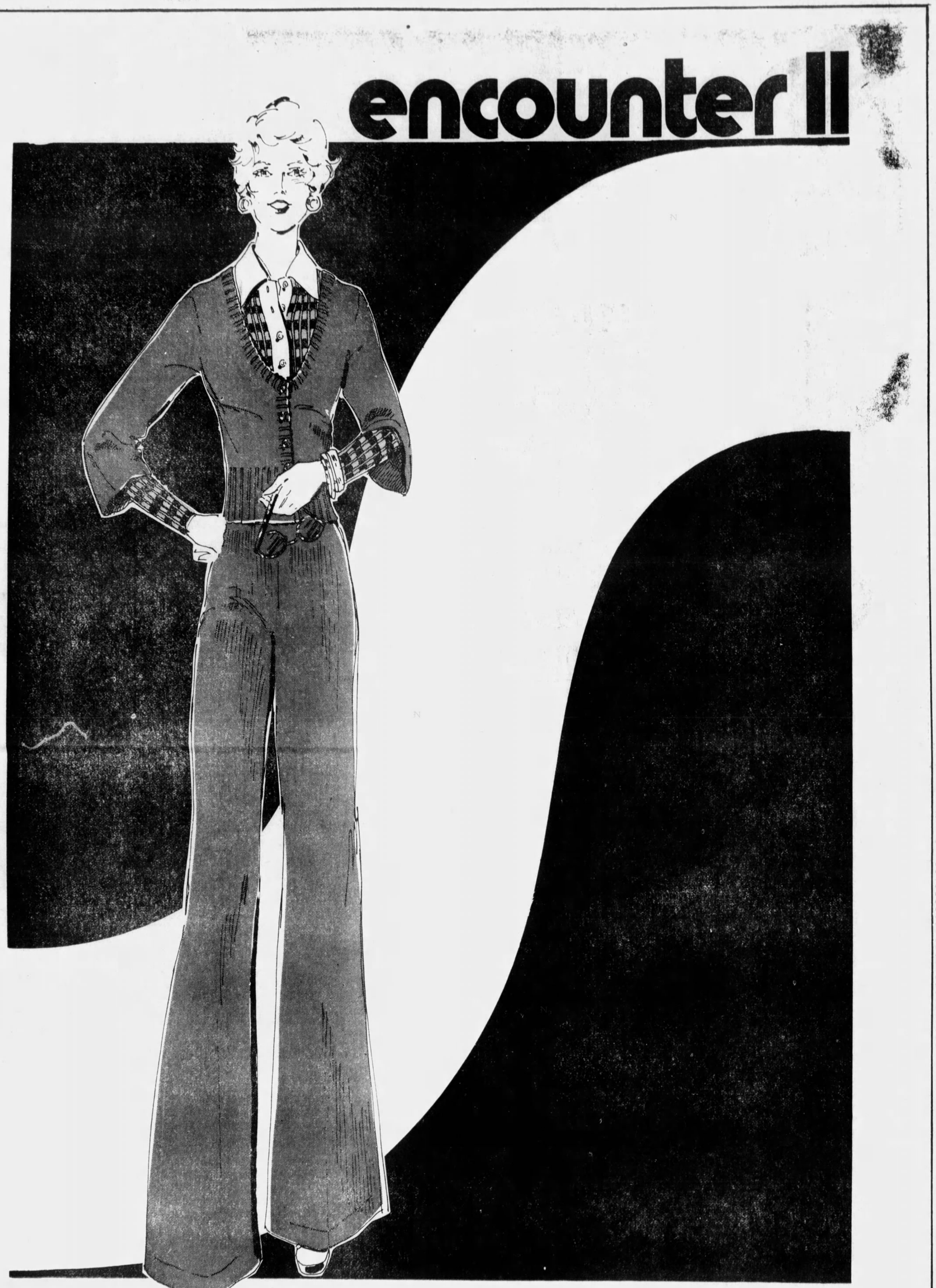
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